

THE RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP IN ACTION RESEARCH: A CASE STUDY INVOLVING AUSTRALIAN PROJECT MANAGERS

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Abstract

The relationship between an action researcher and their research participant(s) or informants is integral to the quality of the research output. Identification of appropriate informants and securing their agreement to be part of the research project is one of the first steps in establishing a working relationship. To sustain this relationship a deep level of trust needs to be established and carefully nurtured so it is retained throughout the life of the research project to enable quality results. Trust is core to action research as it describes the "... honesty, and respect [which] are pre-conditions of the search for truth/truths" [1]. The establishment of trust can be formalised using documented consent forms and codes of conduct and through informal behaviours and reassurances of the confidentiality and anonymity of the informant's involvement in the action research project.

To be effective, the action researcher needs to identify the "... issues and problems in action research which require an ethical code of practice to be negotiated between the researcher and the participants [2]. Through negotiation, the action researcher and the Informant(s) will have a clearer understanding of what they have agreed to deliver within the constraints of the environment in which the research is to be conducted. These constraints may include the requirement for the research project to be reviewed by an independent ethics committee and possibly meet codes of ethics stipulated by professional associations. At the same time, when the research is being conducted, the action researcher needs to maintain a trusting relationship with the informants to ensure that the changes that may occur in their practice, as a result of action researcher interventions, are not threatening to themselves or their employer.

The leading question which will be explored in this paper is how does an action researcher determine what is required from their informants to meet the research brief, and once identified and engaged, how to develop appropriate relationships to ensure the quality of the research outcomes. This question will be explored through examining a recent action research project which was aimed at identifying how project managers in Australia share knowledge while managing projects.

The way in which knowledge is acquired and exchanged when managing projects was undertaken using a four-staged action research cycle that involved regular interventions in the project manager's workplace. The interventions involved the researcher conducting one-on-one convergent interviews followed by individual observation days. During these interventions the role of the research informant evolved from being an informant to taking on the role of a research partner. This evolution is evident as the research informants were invited to participate in a final intervention. This intervention was framed as a Focus Group meeting where a review was undertaken into how a tool developed by the researcher to facilitate knowledge exchange was implemented by the research partners. Throughout the action research cycles the research informant was required to complete a reflective journal to capture lessons that were learnt during the research.

One of the outcomes of this paper will be an increased awareness of the relationship between a researcher and their informants, and how this role may evolve as demonstrated through an action research project.

Keywords: Project management, action research, informants, research partner, trust.

1 SITUATING THE RESEARCH

To undertake research into practice, action research requires and provides a process to plan, act, observe, and reflect in an iterative cycle. This four-stage cycle represents what Kolb described when referring to Lewin's [3] experiential learning model as "...a social learning and problem-solving process that generates valid information to assess deviations from desired goals. This information feedback

provided the basis for a continuous process of goal directed action and evaluation of the consequences of that action” [4].

The idiographic nature of the research directed the investigation toward the process used to examine social settings and create opportunities to reflect on actions. The investigation was underpinned by action science and intrinsically linked to the action research methodology. Action science is defined by Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith [5] as “...an inquiry into how human beings design and implement action in relation to one another” [6] that “...seeks both to promote learning in the client system and to contribute to general knowledge” [7]. To narrow the focus on a specific methodology, this research is in “...a family of research methodologies that pursue the dual outcomes of action and research.... profit[ing] from the use of a cyclical or spiral process in which the researcher alternates action with critical reflection” [8].

A dual cycle approach to action research where a problem is investigated at the same time as research being undertaken was developed by McKay and Marshall [9] and based on a single-cycle action research approach developed by Susman and Evered [10], Checkland [11] and Burns [12]. The work of McKay and Marshall [13] was reviewed to identify how multiple cycles of problem solving activity could be incorporated into the research interest. The interlinked approach of solving a problem and at the same time meeting a research need to “...bring about improvements through making changes in a problematic situation, and...generate new knowledge and new insights” [14] is illustrated in Fig. 1.

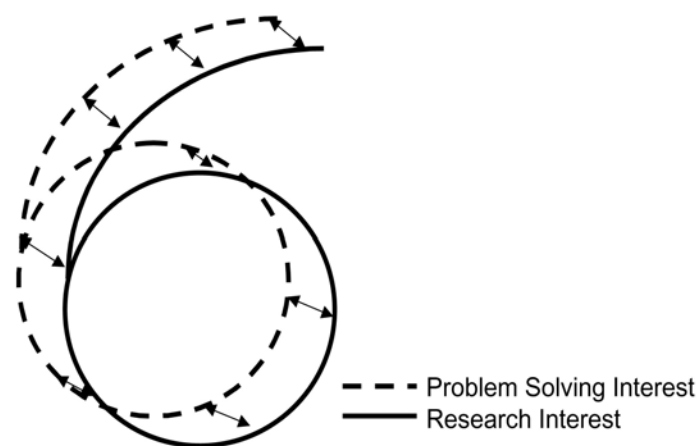


Fig. 1: Action Research viewed as a dual cycle process [15]

This problem-solving and research interest model provided the link to action research to generate new insights into how knowledge was acquired and exchanged by project managers. The alignment of the research interest with problem solving can provide a vehicle for the ongoing alignment of the focus of the researcher and the research participants.

To access a deeper understanding of the knowledge acquisition and exchange process “... collaborative inquiry [was] carried out by people affected by a problem or concern, often using a cyclical process to increase their understanding of the real problem before moving towards a solution” [16]. These cycles of evaluation are recommended as a way of “... pursuing multiple sources of information” [17] where the researcher should “... ask more questions and give fewer answers” [18].

The framework that was developed for this research project extended the dual cycle process using Piggot-Irvine’s [19] Problem Resolving Action Research (PRAR) Model. The three action research cycles were used to intervene in the research participant’s practice of managing projects. The first and second ‘interventions’ were conducted to examine the existing situation where the research participants were working. The third ‘intervention’ was designed to implement a change through the introduction of a different way of working, and the fourth ‘intervention’ provided a forum to evaluate the change that the research participants implemented. Throughout the action research cycles, the involvement of an ‘External Reference Group’ (ERG), that included senior industry, academic, and association representatives, provided additional advice on the research and the researcher’s approach through several “spinoff” cycles. During the interventions and the meetings with the External Reference Group, work was planned, action taken, observations collected and reflections documented, following the cycle below in Fig. 2.

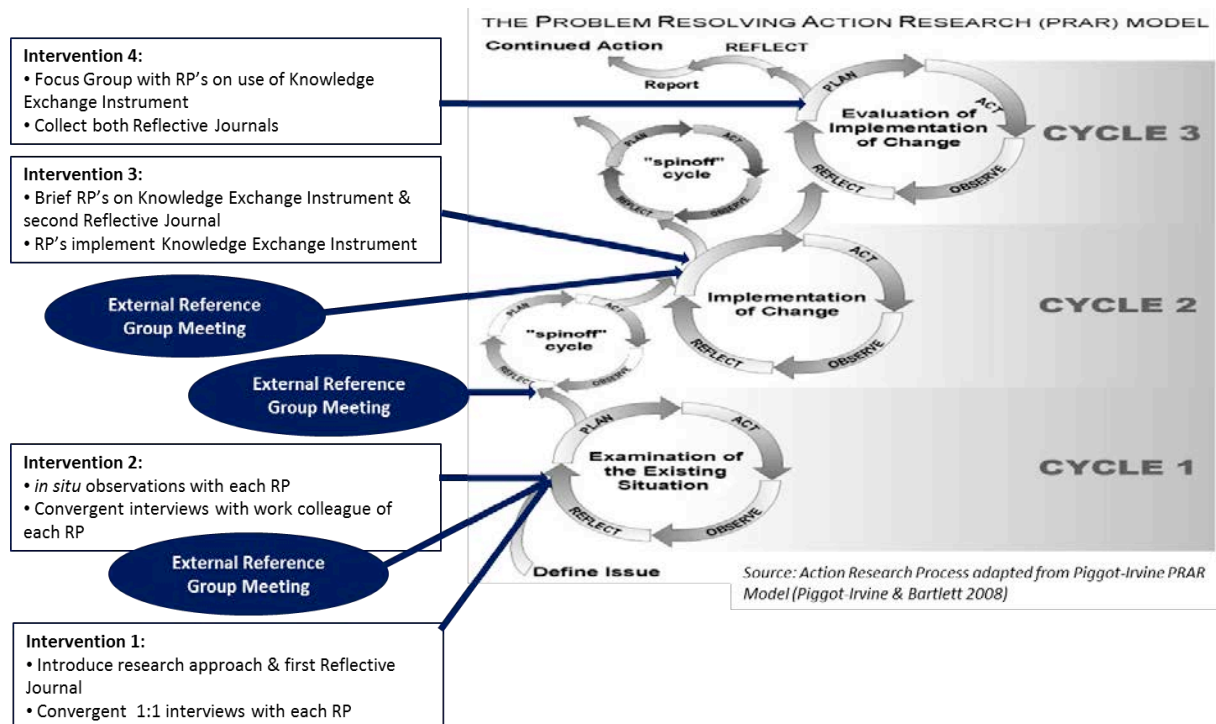


Fig. 2: Action Research Methodology built on Piggot-Irvine's [19] Problem Resolving Action Research (PRAR) Model.

To explain what was occurring in the project manager's workplace to acquire and exchange knowledge, the research participants needed to be observed at work to provide the necessary empirical evidence. The approach of the research was specifically designed to observe individual project managers through subjective interpretations.

2 CODE OF ETHICS

The requirement to meet ethical standards when conducting research is often driven by the institute conducting the research and in some cases the governing protocols of industry associations. This research was conducted with respect to the ethical responsibilities of human research within the University of Technology, Sydney, (UTS) guidelines [20]. These guidelines are enforced by representatives across a range of interest groups who form an Ethics Committee. These guidelines are based on the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research [21], and require researchers to undertake their research with:

- Honesty and integrity
- Respect for human research participants, animals and the environment
- Good stewardship of public resources used to conduct research
- Appropriate acknowledgment of the role of others in research
- Responsible communication of research results

Specifically, the research must consider the welfare and impact of the research on the research participants at all times, and also the researcher. To ensure this is clearly documented, the ethics application requires the researcher to consider the following key areas:

- How will the research participants/subjects be recruited?
- How will research participants/subjects be affected?
- What risk or harm may occur to the research participants/subjects?
- Will the research participants/subjects be offered a reward/benefit/payment?
- Will the research be free of any deception of research participants/subjects?
- Are there any pre-existing relationships to research participants/subjects?

Undertaking an ethics review of the research according to these specified guidelines assists in explicitly documenting the research methodology to ensure a clear and transparent process was being adopted throughout the research. In particular, the guidelines ensure that the research participant is carefully considered in planning, conducting and reporting on the research. This focus on the research participant's needs builds behaviours into the research approach that facilitate a trusting relationship for the action researcher.

The tools used to formalize the involvement of the research participants included written consent forms and explanatory notes, in addition to informal discussions and reassurances of the confidentiality and anonymity of their involvement in the action research project.

The major ethical issues that were identified as potential risks during the course of the research have been outlined in Table 1 below. These ethical issues were analysed and mitigation strategies developed.

Table 1: Ethical Considerations

Ethical Consideration	Action Research Mitigation Strategies
Selection of research participants without bias to the researcher.	Develop appropriate selection criteria to ensure a purposeful set of research participants are available.
Interaction with research participant/s to ensure ongoing participation and integrity of their contribution.	Prepare a letter of consent to manage expectations, ensure confidentiality and allow for redundancy.
Potential bias of the researcher who may use inductive reasoning to induce, lead or influence the research participant/s.	Ensure that each interaction with the research participant/s is documented prior to, referred to during and analysed according to a protocol afterwards.
Research participant/s leaves the research before completion.	If the research participant/s requests to leave the research, they should be asked to provide a notice of withdrawal and remind them that in the initial agreement the data would be included in the report. Ensure wording which seeks their consent to use all data generated in the study is included in a written consent agreement form executed at the beginning of the study.
The privacy and confidentiality of the reflective journal as they will be read and may describe both positive and negative (possibly stressful) experiences.	Ensure that the research method is robust and identifies the required interventions and responsibilities of both the research participant/s and the researcher.

As the research progressed there were no additional ethical issues that arose and at completion none of the identified ethical issues occurred. As Brydon-Miller et al [22] noted the action researcher must be constantly aware of the ethical concerns and "...to develop a truly ethical practice we must remain constantly mindful of these issues and must continue to strive to make ethical practice manifest in every micro-decision in the work we do" [23].

3 THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP

The research described in this paper was undertaken with six project managers, referred to as the 'research participant/s'. This sample size was selected as it has been shown by Mintzberg [24] and other social researchers [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32], [33] to be a valid number to use for specific research studies. Mintzberg observed managers using empirical evidence instead of what he referred to as "Fayol's fifty year old description of managerial work as planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling" [34]. Mintzberg proposed a form of structured observation that records events such as duration, participation, and purpose which "...are developed as the observation takes place" [35] using chronology, mail and contact records. Similar research studies were undertaken by

Kotter into the ways organisations are managed [36] and led [37]. The findings of Kotter's research revealed several trends which were captured in his "Ten Observations About 'Managerial Behaviour'" [38]. Kotter observed what these managers did to logically prioritise for the group which was described in timed diary notes and included transcribed conversations. What Kotter discovered was that 'wasted' time provided the managers with an informal vehicle to engage "in seemingly random chats with seemingly random people, all the while promoting their agendas and building their networks" [39].

3.1 Selection Criteria

Based on Mintzberg's [40] desire for managers to learn on-the-job and Kotter's [41], [42] model of observing executives behaviour, this research focused on observing and interacting with six research participants selected from a network of project managers to represent a range of industries and project types. The selection criteria required that the project managers needed to have a tertiary qualification, such as a Bachelor's degree, but not necessarily in project management; an industry certification; a minimum of five years project management experience; were currently employed in project management roles in Australia; worked in different organisations, and could commit to between 12 and 18 months of interactions with the researcher. Finally, the research participants needed to have support from their organization, management and peers, as they would be impacted potentially by the research.

After undertaking a "snowball" technique to gather appropriate research participants, eight agreed to join the research project. This technique "...uses a small pool of initial informants to nominate other participants who meet the eligibility criteria for a study. The name reflects an analogy to a snowball increasing in size as it rolls downhill" [43]. After the first intervention, involving the convergent interviews, two research participants left the research project due to loss of project roles. The remaining six research participants had a minimum of five years project management experience and were employed full time project managers in Australia. The industry sectors from which the project managers came were deliberately diverse so that the research captured how knowledge was acquired and exchanged in a variety of sectors. The sectors that were represented include: information technology; engineering; financial services, and public infrastructure. All research participants had a formal qualification, although not in project management, such as a degree which included project management subjects. Four of the research participants held professional certifications from industry associations.

To secure the research participants agreement, a letter of consent outlining the research and their obligations was provided to each research participant. Once approval was gained from the research participant and their employer, appointments were scheduled to undertake the research.

To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants their names were changed in the research records. Pseudonyms were used to de-identify the research participants using the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) phonetic alphabet, which is also used for the International Civil Aviation Organization.

3.2 Interactions

The contact made with the research participants over the four action research cycles spanned 18 months and followed an agreed schedule of interventions which at times was altered to accommodate the availability of the research participants. The schedule also included the 'spin off' action research cycles which engaged the External Reference Group. The initial plan to interact with the research participants included three interventions and two meetings with the External Reference Group. Following the first interactions with both groups the contact plan was re-designed as more interactions were needed with these two groups. This need for more interaction stemmed from the discussions around the development and implementation of a 'Knowledge Exchange Instrument' (KEI). This instrument was used to 'disrupt' the research participants practice so observations could be gathered on any improvements in their exchange of knowledge. The contact plan is depicted below in Fig. 3. The progression of the interactions also saw the role of the research participant evolve from that of an *informant* to a *partner* in the research process.

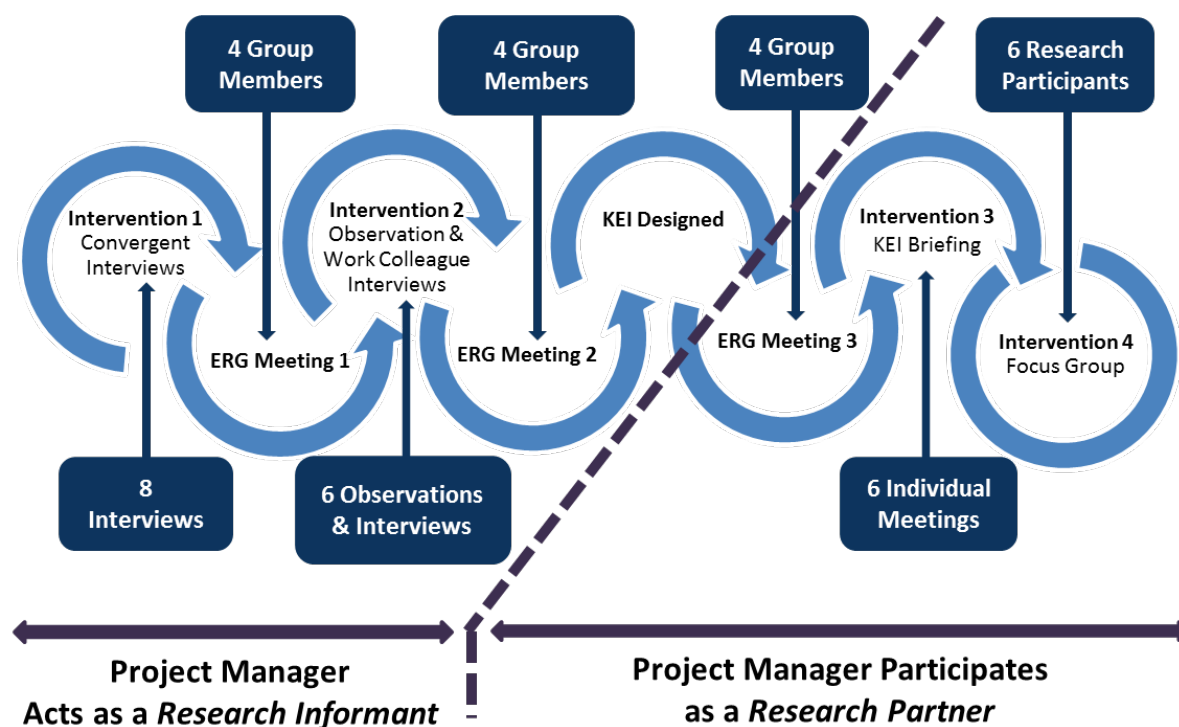


Fig. 3: Research Participant Contact Plan

To provide these research participants with the opportunity to effectively contribute to the research a relationship needed to be established with each person to ensure cooperation in a collegiate manner throughout the research. As Altrichter states “...action research holds that profound and lasting development of practice will only occur in collaboration with other persons concerned with the situation under research and not against their will” [44].

4 SUMMARY

Through using an adapted action research methodology, research participants were centrally positioned to share experiences and beliefs, which was dependent on the relationships developed with the researcher. To ensure a solid foundation was established to build a trusting environment in which to work with the research participants, the action researcher prepared detailed protocols that met ethical codes of conduct for the research. Additional agreements relating to transparency of the relationship, while at the same time focusing on answering the research questions, were established at the beginning and reinforced throughout the action research project.

The role of the research participant evolved throughout the research and required a rigorous plan to manage the contributions within the scope of the research, and according to agreed ethical protocols. In the case of this action research project, the researcher developed a robust methodology, including an external reference group to provide general observations and guidance to ensure the research participants were informed and engaged throughout the research project. The focus on the research participant's needs generated behaviours in the research approach that facilitated a trusting relationship for the action researcher to address the research questions.

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